DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 106 FL 019 016

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TITLE New Approach toward Foreign Language TA Supervision.
PUB DATE Oct 89
NOTE 14p.; In: Fryer, Bruce T., Ed.; Medley, Frank W., Jr., Ed. Perspectives and Horizons. Dimension: Languages 89. Report of Southern Conference on Language Teaching.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Competency Based Education; Higher Education; Inservice Teacher Education; *Language Teachers; Methods Courses; Preservice Teacher Education; *Program Development; Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Education; Teacher Evaluation; *Teacher Supervision; *Teaching Assistants; Workshops

ABSTRACT

A comprehensive approach to the supervision and training of teaching assistants (TAs) in the proficiency-based classroom might include a pre-service workshop, in-service methodology courses linked to appropriate teaching assignments, and systematic observations and evaluations of their performance as instructors. An intensive pre-service workshop can acquaint TAs with the mechanics of planning, instruction, and evaluation, familiarize them with university and department structure, and provide an overview of materials and the principles around which a proficiency-based classroom is organized. Substantial changes in the beginning level curriculum require methodology courses addressing features of the newly designed curriculum. A course for all first-year TAs meeting 2 hours weekly during the fall term and an additional 1-hour course each subsequent teaching term can provide the structure necessary for an organized presentation of basic teaching principles, course material previews, and guidance for a successful teaching and learning experience. Effective evaluation of TA performance in classroom teaching, methods course work, and team teaching is important. In the initial methodology course, TAs should develop a unit of materials, and evaluation can assess their effective classroom application. Classroom observation by program coordinator and other faculty, especially mentors, can be useful. An evaluation form and 32-item bibliography are provided. (MSE)

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NEW APPROACH TOWARD FOREIGN LANGUAGE TA SUPERVISION

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INTRODUCTION

As interest has increased during the past several years in teaching languages for functional use, considerable change has been noted in classroom instruction. Beginning level courses are becoming more oriented towards teaching language for communication and less organized around grammatical syllabi, and many institutions are beginning to revise their entire lower level curriculum. This new direction in language teaching brings with it a need to implement changes in TA training and supervision.

The tendency of more and more foreign language educators to envision the sequencing of materials according to functions or task universals (i.e. requesting information, complimenting, expressing agreement or disagreement) is resulting in new, and substantially expanded beginning level textbook programs becoming available. As materials and courses change to reflect this new orientation, so, too, will significant modifications need to be made in the approaches taken to the preparation and supervision of the graduate teaching assistants (TAs) who are often assigned instructional responsibilities in the affected classes. Teaching assistants who have learned the language in a traditional, teacher-centered and grammar-oriented classroom, and who have little or no experience with planning and conducting classes on their own, are often unable to cope with the demands of the proficiency-oriented syllabus. The orchestration of

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diversified, small-group work, practice sessions and situational or contextualized activities simply overwhelm these inexperienced TAs. Understandably, faculty who serve as course coordinators and TA supervisors must address this issue. The American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators has been instrumental in stimulating serious discussion and study of pedagogical questions that relate to the communicative classroom.

The creation of a new basic course structure provides an opportunity for a comprehensive revision of the guidance and training given to the graduate assistants assigned to teach these courses. The development of proficiency in teaching becomes the goal of the TA training, with all activities geared toward the development of a confident and capable instructor who is well versed in the theory and practice of teaching a language for communication.

Just as incoming language students need to be placed according to their background, so, too, may the teaching assistants need to be supervised according to their prior experiences. Those TAs in their first year will tend to need more direct guidance than the more experienced ones, thus dictating to some extent the teaching tasks and other assignments they receive.

A comprehensive approach to TA supervision and training in the proficiency-oriented classroom will likely include (1) a pre-service workshop, (2) in-service methodology courses linked to appropriate teaching assignments, and (3) systematic observations and evaluations of their performance as instructors. The use of mentors at various levels can enrich the program even more, while offering the faculty involved a unique opportunity for interaction with the TAs outside of the usual literature class setting.

PRE-SERVICE WORKSHOP

New TAs usually have no teaching experience, and are often rather frightened and intimidated by the thought of being in charge of the classroom. They have no idea how to plan for instruction, how to conduct a class, how to evaluate the performance of their students, and so on. Similarly, they often harbor a fear that they, themselves, may not have the necessary degree of control of the language that will enable them to "answer

questions about the grammar," and they secretly wonder whether they can handle any disciplinary problem that might arise. A very effective way to address these concerns a priori is through a workshop that is scheduled immediately prior to the beginning of the term. This intensive pre-service workshop, usually held the week before classes start is designed to prepare the TAs for their assignments by acquainting them with the mechanics of planning, instruction, evaluation, etc. During the workshop, the new TAs are familiarized with university and departmental structure and receive a general overview of the materials to be used and the principles around which a proficiency-based classroom is organized. An introduction to the laboratory facilities and other support services may also be included. During the initial stages of the workshop, TAs also receive an explanation of the content and rationale of the training program in which they will be participating. Although the more experienced TAs may need only a short refresher workshop, they should be encouraged to work closely with the new TAs on a regular basis.

IN-SERVICE METHODOLOGY COURSES

Substantial changes in the beginning level curriculum require methodology courses that address the features of the newly designed curriculum. A course that meets two hours weekly for all first-year TAs during the fall term, and an additional one-hour course required of all TAs each term while they are in the graduate program can provide the structure necessary for an organized presentation of basic teaching principles, course material previews, and the guidance necessary for a successful teaching and learning experience for the TAs. The coordinator may hold weekly meetings for the new TAs in which they receive a lesson guide and go over the instructional objectives and procedures for the upcoming week. Ideally, the new TAs will be able to work with an experienced instructor during their first term, thus allowing them to observe, assist and participate in the class on a regular basis in a team-teaching situation, as well as teach one day a week on their own, using the materials previewed in the methods course. In this manner, a mentoring process is established as an integral part of their preparation. During the first week of instruction for each unit, for example, the TAs can be assigned the task of conducting reinforcement activities that focus on the listening skill and can conduct a variety of communicative

exercises for paired and group work. During the second week of instruction the TAs might be asked to focus their energies on developing reading activities based on authentic materials and contextualized activities that could serve as a review of the lesson prior to the chapter test. This approach enhances the learning experience for the student, and builds self-confidence in the TAs, who are working with materials already familiar to them. When a TA works with several classes, the repetition of a single lesson also helps instill confidence in their performance and provides an opportunity for constant improvement.

The two-hour methodology course, which is designed to provide a theoretical base upon which to build practical experience, will most likely require a text such as Alice Omaggio's Teaching Language in Context (Omaggio, 1986). The objectives for this course should reflect the same orientation towards performance as does the new proficiency-based curriculum. For example, the course objectives might state that graduate teaching assistants would be able to:

1. organize an instructional sequence around a list of task universals;
2. use a variety of contextualized activities to practice specific grammatical structures and lexical units;
3. prepare classroom materials that will lead to the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing ability and a greater awareness of characteristics of the target language's culture;
4. demonstrate several different approaches appropriate for the evaluation of oral skills;
5. demonstrate several different approaches appropriate for the evaluation of reading and writing skills;
6. develop activities for paired and group work based on authentic materials;
7. apply effective correction strategies for student errors.

Necessary components of the course include practice in writing objectives in terms of language functions, preparing lesson plans, maintaining good records for student evaluation, and developing techniques for teaching dialogues and vocabulary and learning to elicit and rate samples of oral language. Given the practical nature of the course, each graduate student should be expected to do at least two demonstration lessons: one

grammatical in nature and the other lexical. These presentations should reflect an orientation towards proficiency, and should be part of a lesson plan that includes the functional objectives, the contexts, the design for the presentation, an example of a controlled-type exercise and another of a guided communicative activity for paired or group work. This particular assignment is designed to help the TAs reduce the emphasis on grammar explanation and keep in mind that the class is student-centered and that the teacher is a facilitator.

The two-hour methods course should include several lessons on techniques for oral evaluations. In-class practices may be provided in which the TAs listen to sample interviews and evaluate them on their own. They can then compare and discuss their evaluations with those of their fellow TAs and the course director. Although the purpose of this activity is not to produce certified oral proficiency interviewers and raters, it will provide experience in conducting interviews and assessing students' speaking skills in the classroom. As a result of this preparation, the graduate students develop a degree of familiarity and confidence with the actual evaluative process they will use in the classes they teach.

Each term (semester or trimester) a one-hour methods course for both new and returning graduate teaching assistants can provide experience in the preparation of proficiency-based materials which are directly linked to the course that they are teaching. In the fall, the once-weekly session can provide an overview of the year's activities. In the spring it may be used to review plans for the current term and to preview the coming summer and fall terms. The additional preparation and training provided by these one-hour courses allow the graduate students to enter the term when they teach their own course with a better idea of what needs to be accomplished and a solid background in how to use proficiency-based materials in the classroom.

Although the TAs have received a great deal of training by the end of their first year, they still may not be ready to assume complete control and responsibility for their classes, especially given the multiple-section courses offered at the beginning levels. The nature of these courses requires that homogeneity be maintained across sections, thus allowing for minimal deviation with respect to content and instructional strategies. The course supervisor or coordinator in this situation provides the framework, in the form of the course syllabus and the major exams, and

allows the teaching assistants to have an experience somewhat different from the highly structured guidance given to the first-year TAs. The experienced TAs should be in charge of the day-to-day responsibilities of their course such as the development of quizzes and supplementary activities, record keeping, student conferences, etc. TAs at this level may also be given the opportunity to provide materials for use by all staff members, thus building on experience gained during their initial two-hour methods course.

The course supervisor should hold meetings as needed with the novice teachers, although a good deal of the coordination can take place through the use of memos and day-to-day conversations with the individual TAs. The majority of these one-on-one chats will most likely concern confusion over university policies and regulations, problems with student discipline or instructional problems regarding special learners. The role of the coordinator in this situation is that of advisor, resource person, trouble-shooter, and in many cases, listener. The TAs at this level need to begin to make some decisions that will have an effect on all sections of the course and take responsibility for those decisions.

The proficiency-oriented classroom, with its group and paired work, situational exercises, and other student-centered activities provides a unique opportunity for the experienced TAs who have worked with faculty mentors during the first year. In the spring term, the new TAs may be assigned to team-teach with a more experienced TA, working once again with the listening, reading and communicative exercises used during their first term teaching assignment. Since the new TAs are using materials that are already somewhat familiar to them, they tend to feel more confident and are able to expand upon their previous presentations. At the same time, they are once again working with a more experienced individual; in this case someone who has gone through the program before them. By this point in their professional development, the experienced TAs have the background and the confidence necessary to begin to serve as role models for others. This experience also reinforces the need for and the importance of cooperation among colleagues, which in turn helps ensure a smoothly functioning program.

OBSERVATION AND EVALUATION

A very important aspect of any course or training program is effective evaluation of student performance. Since the teaching assistants are involved in classroom teaching, methods course work and team-teaching, the evaluation procedures employed need to address all three areas.

As one of the requirements of the two-hour methods course, the new TAs should prepare a final project in which they are responsible for the development of an entire unit of materials. This type of project is more appropriate than a written end-of-term exam because the language coordinator is able to see exactly how well the graduate students are able to apply the principles that have been presented and discussed in the course. The effectiveness of their project may then become one of the key factors in the determination of teaching assignments in subsequent terms.

Both new and experienced graduate teaching assistants may gain progressive experience in the preparation of materials through the one-hour course that they take each term. The grade for this course may be based upon written observations by the TAs of courses at both the beginning and intermediate levels, participation in other classes through warm-ups and cultural lessons, and preparation of certain materials for classroom and/or testing purposes.

In order to ensure that the TAs are progressing appropriately, the coordinator should observe each one at least twice during the term. The TA supervisor may also encourage the TAs to have additional observations made by other faculty members, especially those serving as mentors. After each observation, a written evaluation should be prepared and then discussed, with both parties having an opportunity to respond to each other's comments (see Appendix A). Since course observations are also required in the methods courses, there is an opportunity for continual feedback on many levels. Both the new and the more experienced TAs may well observe each other, as well as their "mentor" professors. Depending on the course requirements, the TAs may write out extensive observation reports with commentary on techniques observed and their reaction to them, or use the form that is used when they, themselves, are observed by the coordinator/ supervisor. In all cases, the observations need to be used as a learning tool and be treated

as another way to help the TAs improve their classroom effectiveness.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

TAs with training such as that described here are capable of contributing to the department in a variety of ways. The well-balanced presentation of theory and practical applications in the methods courses provides each TA with the basic skills necessary to teach the beginning level courses efficiently and professionally. Beyond the teaching assignment, TAs, who have participated in this type of program tend to work especially well with small conversation courses or, if they are native speakers, as cultural and linguistic resource persons in courses taught by senior faculty; once again introducing the possibility of mentoring. While all TAs may help in the tutorial center or language laboratory, they may also cover a class session for professors away from campus. Increased opportunities to teach during the summer terms and to participate in highly intensive programs or special intra-campus summer exchanges may also accrue to the teaching assistants who are better qualified to function effectively with less supervision.

While not all foreign language departments have the flexibility to implement the curricular changes mentioned here, many universities do rely on graduate teaching assistants to do the bulk of the teaching at the beginning levels. This fact alone dictates that those in charge of coordination and supervision provide the best possible training for these future foreign language professionals so that they, and more importantly, their students, receive optimum instruction in the foreign language. Finally, the concept of designing a student-centered classroom is not restricted to the foreign language classroom. TAs who understand these principles will undoubtedly become more effective teachers, regardless of the content of the courses they teach. Thus, a TA supervision program which incorporates pre-service workshops, methodology courses linked to the in-service teaching assignments, systematic observations and evaluations and mentoring can do much to provide the profession with instructors who are well-prepared to staff proficiency-oriented classrooms at all levels of instruction.

APPENDIX A

TA Teaching Evaluation Form

Instructor: Course:
Observer: Date:

1. The warm-up was effective and well-organized. 1) Excellent. 2) Satisfactory. 3) Improvement needed.
   Comment:

2. Organization was evident throughout the lesson, with smooth transitions.
   1) Consistently. 2) Mostly.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Infrequently.
   Comment:

3. The use of Spanish and English was suitable for the different situations.
   1) Always. 2) Mostly.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Infrequently.
   Comment:

4. Explanations and activities were clear, brief, accurate, and fast-paced.
   1) Always. 2) Usually.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Lacking.
   Comment:

5. The use of time, the chalk board, and other teaching materials reflected a positive presentation of each aspect of the lesson.
   1) Always. 2) Usually.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Lacking.
   Comment:

6. The use of corrective feedback was effective and positive.
   1) Always. 2) Usually.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Lacking.
   Comment:

7. The activities represented a good variety and matched the level and interest of the students.
   1) Always. 2) Usually.
   3) Occasionally. 4) Lacking.
   Comment:

8. The entire class was involved in interactive ways.
   1) Frequently and appropriately.
   2) Often, but inappropriately at times.
   3) Infrequently, but appropriately when evident.
   4) Infrequently and inappropriately.
   5) Never.
   Comment:

9. The students clearly understood the format of the activities.
   1) Always. 2) Usually. 3) Sometimes.
   4) Lacking.
   Comment:

10. The classroom environment was positive; the material was presented confidently and the students responded favorably.
    1) Consistently. 2) Mostly.
    3) Lacking.
    Comment:

11. Observer's Remarks:

    Signature:

12. Instructor's Remarks:

    Signature:

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